Little Red Riding-Hood

In the old days when countrywomen wore riding-hoods to keep themselves warm and dry as they rode to market, there was a child living in a little village near the Low Forest who was very vain. She was so vain she couldn't even pass a puddle without peeping down into it at her apple cheeks and yellow hair. She could be happy for hours together with nothing but a comb and a glass; and then would sit at the window for people to see her. Nothing pleased her better than fine clothes, and when she was seven, having seen a strange woman riding by on horseback, she suddenly had a violent longing for just such a riding-hood as hers, and that was of a scarlet cloth with strings.

After this, she gave her mother no peace, but begged and pestered her continually, and flew into a passion or sulked when she said, No. When, then, one day a pedlar came to the village, and among the rest of his wares showed her mother a strip of scarlet cloth which he could sell cheap, partly to please the child and partly to get a little quiet, she bought a few yards of this cloth

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and herself cut out and stitched up a hood of the usual shape and fashion, but of midget size and with ribbons for strings.

When the child saw it she almost choked with delight and peacocked about in it whenever she had the chance. So she grew vainer than ever, and the neighbours became so used to seeing her wearing it in all weathers, her yellow curls dangling on her cheeks and her bright blue eyes looking out from under its hood, that they called her Little Red Riding-Hood.

Now, one fine sunny morning her mother called Little Red Riding-Hood in from her playing and said to her: "Now listen. I've just had news that your poor old Grannie is lying ill in bed and can't stir hand or foot; so as I can't go to see her myself, I want *you* to go instead, and to take her a little present. It's a good long step to Grannie's, mind; but if you don't loiter on the way there'll be plenty of time to be there and back before dark, and to stay a bit with Grannie, too. But *mind*, go straight there and come straight back, and be sure not to speak to anybody whatsoever you meet in the forest. It doesn't look to me like rain, so you can wear your new hood. Poor Grannie will hardly know you!"

Nothing in this long speech pleased Red Riding-Hood so much as the end of it. She ran off at once, and as she combed her hair and put on her hood, she talked to herself in the glass. There was one thing: Red Riding-Hood liked her Grannie pretty well, but she liked the goodies her Grannie gave her even better. So she thought to herself: "If the basket is heavy, I shall take a little rest on the way; and as Grannie's in bed, I shall have plenty to eat when I get there because I can help myself, and I can bring something home in the empty basket. Grannie would like that. Then I can skip along as I please."

Meanwhile, her mother was packing up the basket—a dozen brown hen's eggs, a jar of honey, a pound of butter, a bottle of

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elderberry wine, and a screw of snuff. After a last look at herself in a polished stewpan, Red Riding-Hood took the basket on her arm and kissed her mother goodbye.

"Now, mind," said her mother yet again, "be sure not to lag or loiter in the Low Forest, picking flowers or chasing the butterflies, and don't speak to any stranger there, not even though he looks as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Do all you can for Grannie, and come straight home."

Red Riding-Hood started off, so pleased with herself and with her head so packed up with greedy thoughts of what she would have to eat at the end of her journey that she forgot to wave back a last goodbye before the path across the buttercup meadow dipped down towards the woods and her mother was out of sight.

On through the sunny lanes among the butterflies she went. The hawthorns, snow-white and crimson, were in fullest flower, and the air was laden with their smell. All the trees of the wood, indeed, were rejoicing in their new green coats, and there was such a medley and concourse of birds singing that their notes sounded like drops of water falling into a fountain.

When Red Riding-Hood heard this shrill sweet warbling she thought to herself: "They are looking at *me* as I go along all by myself with my basket in my bright red hood." And she skipped on more gaily than ever.

But the basket grew heavier and heavier the further she journeyed, and when at last she came to the Low Forest the shade there was so cool and so many strange flowers were blooming in its glens and dingles, that she forgot everything her mother had told her and sat down to rest. Moss, wild thyme and violets grew on that bank, and presently she fell asleep.

In her sleep she dreamed a voice was calling to her from very far away. It was a queer husky voice, and seemed to be coming from some dark dismal place where the speaker was hiding.

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"They are looking at me *as I go along . . .*
in my bright red hood."

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At the sound of this voice calling and calling her ever more faintly, she suddenly awoke, and there, not more than a few yards away, stood a Wolf, and he was steadily looking at her. At first she was so frightened she could hardly breathe, and could only stare back at him.

But the moment the Wolf saw that she was awake he smiled at her, or rather his jaws opened and he grinned; and then in tones as wheedling and buttery-smooth as his tongue could manage he said: "Good-afternoon, my dear. I hope you are refreshed after your little nap. But what, may I ask, are *you* doing here, all alone in the forest, and in that beautiful, bright red hood, too?" As he uttered these words he went on grinning at her in so friendly a fashion that little Red Riding-Hood could not but smile at him in return.

She told him she was on her way to her Grannie's.

"I see," said the Wolf, not knowing that through his very wiliness he would be stretched out that evening as cold as mutton! "And what might you have in that heavy basket, my dear?"

Little Red Riding-Hood tossed her head so that her curls glinted in a sunbeam that was twinkling through the leaves of the tree beneath which she was sitting, and she said, "My Grannie is very very ill in bed. Perhaps she'll die. So that's why I'm carrying this heavy basket. It's got eggs and butter, and honey and wine, and snuff inside it. And I'm all by myself!"

"My!" said the Wolf. "All by yourself; and a packet of snuff, too! But how, my little dear, will you be able to get in at the door if your Grannie is ill in bed? How will you manage that?"

"Oh," said Red Riding-Hood, "that will be quite easy. I shall just tap seven times and say, 'It's me, Grannie'; then Grannie will know who it is and tell me how to get in."

"But how clever!" said the Wolf. "And where does your poor dear Grannie live? And which way are *you* going?"

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Little Red Riding-Hood told him; then he stopped grinning and looked away. "I was just thinking, my dear," he went on softly, "how very lucky it was we met! I know your Grannie's cottage well. Many's the time I've seen her sitting there at her window. But I can tell you a much, *much* shorter way to it. If you go *your* way, I'm afraid you won't be home till long after dark, and that would never do. For sometimes one meets queer people in the Low Forest, not at all what you would care for."

But what this crafty wretch told her was a way which was at least half a mile further round. Red Riding-Hood thanked him, seeing no harm in his sly grinning, and started off by the way he had said. But he himself went louping off by a much shorter cut, and came to her grandmother's cottage long before she did. And there was not a living thing in sight.

Having entered the porch, the Wolf lifted his paw and, keeping his claws well in, rapped seven times on the door.

An old quavering voice called, "Who's there?" And the Wolf, muffling his tones, said, "It's me, Grannie!"

"Stand on the stone, pull the string, and the door will come open," said the old woman.

So the Wolf got up on to his hind legs and with his teeth tugged at the string. The door came open, and in he went; and that (for a while) was the end of Grannie.

But what Master Wolf had planned for his supper that evening was not just Grannie, but Grannie *first* and then—for a titbit—Red Riding-Hood afterwards.

And he knew well there were woodmen in the forest, and that it would be far safer to wait in hiding for her in the cottage than to carry her off openly.

So, having drawn close the curtains at the window, he put on the old woman's clean nightgown which was lying upon a chair, tied her nightcap over his ears, scrambled into her bed, drew up the clothes

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over him, and laid himself down at all his long length with his head on the pillow. There then he lay, waiting for Red Riding-Hood and thinking he was safe as safe; and an ugly heap he looked.

All this time Red Riding-Hood had been still loitering, picking wild flowers and chasing bright-winged butterflies, and once she had sat down and helped herself to a taste or two of her Grannie's honey.

But at last her footsteps sounded on the cobbles; and there came seven taps at the door.

Then the Wolf, smiling to himself and mimicking the old woman, and trying to say the words as she had said them, called, "Who's there?"

Red Riding-Hood said, "It's me, Grannie!"

And the Wolf said, "Stand on the stone, pull the string, and the door will come open."

Red Riding-Hood stood on her tiptoes, pulled the string, and went in; and one narrow beam of sunshine strayed in after her, for she left the door a little ajar. And there was her Grannie, as she supposed, lying ill in bed. The Wolf peered out at her from under the old woman's nightcap, but the light was so dim in the cottage that at first Red Riding-Hood could not see him at all clearly, only the frilled nightcap and the long, bony hump of him sticking up under the bedclothes.

"Look what *I*'ve brought you, Grannie," she said. "Some butter, a jar of honey, some eggs, a bottle of wine, and a packet of snuff. And I've come all the way by myself in my new red riding-hood!"

The Wolf said, "Umph!"

Red Riding-Hood peeped about her. "I *expect*, Grannie," she said, "if I was to look in that cupboard over there, there'd be some of those jam-tarts you made for me last time I came, and some cake too, I *expect*, to take home, Grannie; and please may I have a drink of milk *now*?"

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The Wolf said, "Umph!"

Then Red Riding-Hood went a little nearer to look at her Grannie in bed. She looked a long, long time, and at last she said, "Oh, Grannie, what very bright eyes you have!"

And the Wolf said, "All the better to *see* with, my dear."

Then Red Riding-Hood said, "And oh, Grannie, what long pointed nails you have!"

And the Wolf said, "All the better to *scratch* with, my dear."

Then Red Riding-Hood said, "And what high hairy sticking-up ears you have, Grannie!"

"All the better to *hear* with, my dear," said the Wolf.

"And, oh, Grannie," cried Red Riding-Hood, "what great huge big teeth you have!"

"All the better to *eat* with!" yelled the Wolf, and with that he leapt out of bed in his long nightgown, and before she could say "Oh!" Little Red Riding-Hood was gobbled up, nose, toes, hood, snuff, butter, honey and all.

Nevertheless, that cunning greedy crafty old Wolf had not been quite cunning enough. He had bolted down such a meal that the old glutton at once went off to sleep on the bed, with his ears sticking out of his nightcap, and his tail lolling out under the quilt. And he had forgotten to shut the door.

Early that evening a woodman, coming home with his axe and a faggot when the first stars were beginning to shine, looked in at the open cottage door, and instead of the old woman saw the Wolf lying there on the bed. He knew the villain at sight.

"Oho! you old ruffian," he cried softly, "is it *you*?"

At this far-away strange sound in his dreams, the Wolf opened—though by scarcely more than a hair's breadth—his dull, drowsy eyes. But at glimpse of the woodman, his wits came instantly back to him, and he knew his danger. Too late! Before

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even, clogged up in Grannie's nightgown, he could gather his legs together to spring out of bed, the woodman with one mighty stroke of his axe had finished him off.

And as the woodman stooped over him to make sure, he fancied he heard muffled voices squeaking in the wolf's inside as if calling for help. He listened, then at once cut him open, and out came Red Riding-Hood, and out at last crept her poor old Grannie. And though the first thing Red Riding-Hood did, when she could get her breath again, was to run off to the looking-glass and comb out her yellow curls and uncrumple her hood, she never afterwards forgot what a wolf looked like, and never afterwards loitered in the Low Forest.

As for her poor old Grannie, though that one hour's warmth and squeezing had worked wonders with her rheumatism, she lived only for twenty years after. But then, it was on the old woman's seventieth birthday that Red Riding-Hood had set out with her basket.

It was a piece of rare good fortune for them both, at any rate, first, that the woodman had looked in at the cottage door in the very nick of time; next, that he had his axe; and last, that this Wolf was such a senseless old glutton that he never really enjoyed a meal, but swallowed everything whole. Else, Red Riding-Hood and her Grannie would certainly not have come out of him alive, and the people in the village would have had to bury the wicked old rascal in the churchyard—where he would have been far from welcome.

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